
Retailers, Trust and GMOs

Q&A

MODERATOR: MARGARET SMITH
Cornell University
Ithaca, New York

Karen Kindle (Boyce Thompson Institute): Have you taken, or are you planning to take, your message about labeling products that have no GMOs to any of the political debates and conversations that are ongoing?

Jeanne Colleluori: We are members of the Food Marketing Institute here in the United States, which is a food-retailers' association. They were in the process of developing a position statement for the industry and we actually had gotten out in front of it. We were a little more prepared and so they came to us and asked *what did you do, whom did you talk to, and how did you go through the process?* We shared all of our information with them. They went out and polled their other members, and their position statement is actually very similar to ours. They are located in Washington, DC—on the hill all the time. So the message is getting out through FMI. That's where the grocery industry is heading, at least where members of FMI are looking.

Alexa Schmitz (Boyce Thompson Institute): Have you noticed any differential changes since you've made this announcement? I was here in Ithaca and I got all of the news and I heard how people felt about it here, but you are across state lines. Can you comment on how different states have reacted, either through feedback or through customer numbers?

Colleluori: We haven't looked on a state-by-state basis because, a lot of times, when customers comment to us—especially when they make negative comments—they are not always willing to tell us truthfully who they are or where they live. So, we don't really have a great idea regarding customer concerns on a per-state basis, but we are obviously keeping our eye on different types of pending legislation and proposed bills in the six states where we do business. We are keeping our eye on that.

Ralph Hardy (North American Agricultural Biotechnology Council): How have you dealt with the transparency issue on “no-GMO?” What's being classified as “organic” is certainly going to contain traces of GMO. The organic business is going to hurt itself until it establishes minimal thresholds. How are you dealing with that issue?

Colleluori: What we've been doing is saying to our customers is certified organic products don't come from GMO seed. That's the way we are addressing it, and we can go into more detail with customers if we need to. But that's exactly why we are saying that the labeling issue needs to be dealt with at a national level rather than state-by-state, county-by-county, or town-by-town. Until we have a standardized version of labeling, it just does not help the customer at all.

Adam Bogdanove (Cornell University): Like a lot of people in Ithaca, I love Wegmans and I trust them.

Colleluori: Thank you. Our bird beaks are working.

Bogdanove: I was bitten by the bird beaks. This is a follow-up on how representative are your customer comments. Eighty-four stores, six states, 100,000 comments a year—statistically speaking is that a good sampling of population to give you a good idea that the concerns expressed in that fashion are the most important concerns of your consumer base? The aphorism that the squeaky wheel gets the oil partly applies here, right? There are a lot of people who aren't sending in comments because they are happy.

Colleluori: Yes, you are exactly right. We know that, and, no matter what the topic is, if a customer is happy they are probably not going to call us and tell us about it, unfortunately. We hear from the people who have concerns, or just have questions. If you like a product or you like a service, I urge you to call and say so. But it's true, the squeaky wheel gets the attention; that's the only thing we have to base our work on.

Brian Iaffandano (Ohio State University): We've seen companies elect to put “non-GMO” labels on some of their products. Do you have any sense of how powerful that is in terms of monetary value or acceptance?

Colleluori: I can't speak for any other retailers, and we haven't started labeling like that whatsoever, so it's hard for me to address the power of applying such labels or symbols.

What we have done, so far, is say *if you are really concerned your best bet is going to be certified organic*, meaning that it did not come from a GMO source. We are seeing great growth in the area of organics. How much of that is related to GMOs, how much of it is related to sustainability, to local sourcing, to environmental concerns, is hard to tell. But we do see the area of organics as having continued growth potential.



JEANNE COLLELUORI joined Wegmans Food Markets in 1998 as a communications and media specialist for the Department of Consumer Affairs. Her responsibilities include research on, and communication of, ever-changing consumer concerns such as sustainable seafood, food safety and product recalls, genetically engineered foods, and animal welfare. Prior to joining Wegmans, she worked in the food brokerage industry for Daymon Worldwide, focusing on private label design for Wegmans. She also has held various advertising and marketing positions at Saatchi & Saatchi Advertising and Digital Equipment Corporation.

MS. COLLELUORI is a graduate of the College of Business at the Rochester Institute of Technology, Rochester, New York, is a member of the Food Marketing Institute's Seafood Sourcing Committee, and is a past founding member of the FMI Sustainability Executive Committee and FMI Consumer Affairs Steering Committee.